

Equity Gaps in the Trajectories of Community College Students

A CCRC study that tracks term-by-term the proportion of Black, Hispanic, and White community college students who complete high-opportunity workforce credentials, transfer to four-year colleges, and go on to earn bachelor's degrees finds racial/ethnic stratification in how students enter and progress through programs of study that lead to higher- or lower-paying jobs. Using nine years of data from one state, the study also finds that reaching important academic milestones such as gaining credit momentum boosts the likelihood of long-term success more for Black and Hispanic students than for White students.

Key Findings

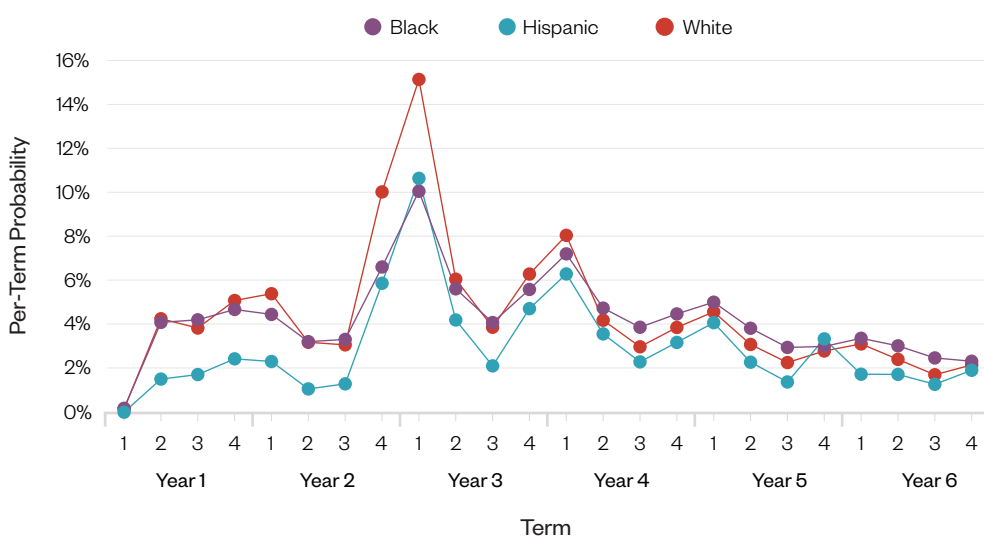
WORKFORCE CREDENTIALS

Black and Hispanic students were 0.7 times as likely and 0.8 times as likely as White students to complete workforce-oriented certificates and associate degrees that are associated with higher-paying jobs. Black students tended to stop out early from higher-value workforce programs, while Hispanic students tended to earn credentials in lower-value rather than higher-value workforce programs.

TRANSFER

Black and Hispanic students were 0.9 times and 0.7 times as likely as White students to transfer to a four-year college. The disparity between Black and White students in transfer emerged after two years, which is about how long it takes a student enrolled full-time to complete an associate degree. In contrast, the Hispanic-White gap emerged during the first year.

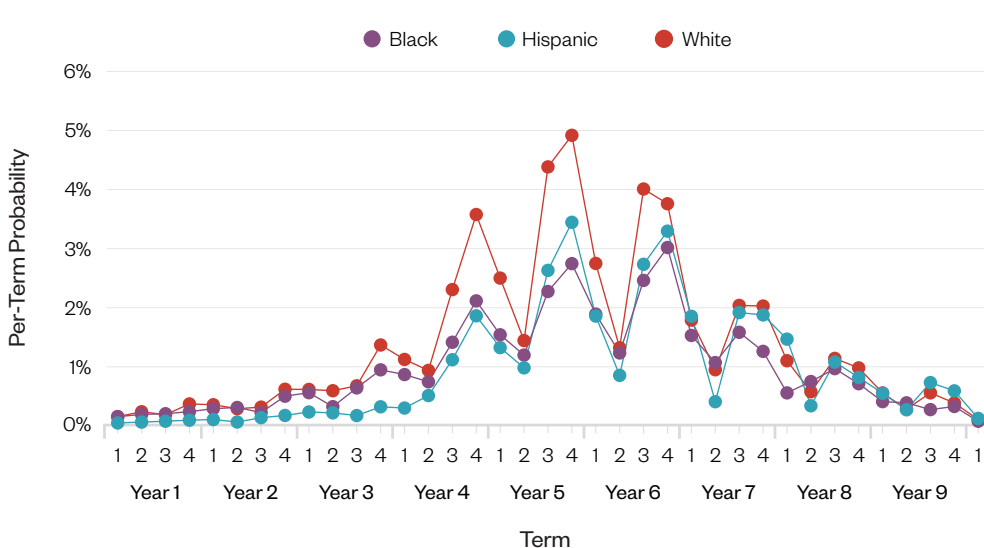
Probability of Transfer to a Four-Year College in Each Term (Among Students Who Did Not Transfer in Prior Terms)



BACHELOR'S DEGREES

Black and Hispanic students were 0.7 times as likely and 0.9 times as likely as White students to complete bachelor's degrees. Gaps in bachelor's degree attainment arose between White students and both Black and Hispanic students at the end of the fourth, fifth, and sixth years. In addition, for Hispanic students, a gap emerged earlier, in the second and third year.

Probability of Completion of a Bachelor's Degree in Each Term (Among Students Who Did Not Complete a Degree in Prior Terms)



THE IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMIC MILESTONES

In an analysis of education milestones—such as passing gateway courses, earning certain numbers of college-level credits, and completing a transfer-oriented associate degree—the study finds that the achievement of particular milestones is associated with an increased likelihood of academic success in the long term, with larger effects for Black and Hispanic students.

MILESTONE ACHIEVED	BLACK STUDENTS	HISPANIC STUDENTS	WHITE STUDENTS
Greater Likelihood of Transferring to a Four-Year College			
Passed introductory college-level math course	4x	8x	4x
Earned 24 college credits	6x	11x	5x
Awarded a transfer-oriented associate degree	13x	21x	9x
Greater Likelihood of Completing a Bachelor's Degree			
Passed introductory college-level math course	4x	5x	3x
Earned 24 college credits	3x	5x	2x
Awarded a transfer-oriented associate degree	7x	10x	5x

Note. "4x" means about 4 times more likely than other students in the same group who did not achieve the milestone.

Black and Hispanic students who achieved milestones such as earning 24 credits or completing a transfer-oriented associate degrees saw stronger benefits in terms of transfer and bachelor's degree attainment than White students. Yet fewer Black and Hispanic students reached these milestones. For example, earning a transfer-oriented associate degree increased the likelihood of bachelor's degree completion by 7 times for Black students, compared to 5 times for White students. However, Black students earned transfer associate degrees at about half the rate of White students.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- Knowing when student success trajectories begin to diverge by race/ethnicity may help colleges identify both mechanisms giving rise to inequities in outcomes and important junctures when students need support.
- Because the achievement of key academic milestones disproportionately benefits Black and Hispanic students, allocating resources to help students achieve these milestones may contribute to a narrowing of equity gaps in long-term outcomes.

FURTHER READING

For more on this research, read *Stratified Trajectories: Charting Equity Gaps in Program Pathways Among Community College Students* by Yuxin Lin, Maggie P. Fay, and John Fink.